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THE CÔA VALLEY

DISCOVERING A LOST GALLERY OF STONE AGE ART

Where can one see a remarkable and unique ensemble of Palaeolithic rock art, a state-of-the-art museum, and some of the most dramatic landscapes in southern Europe? **George Nash** and **Sara Garcês** reveal the answer.

Painted and engraved rock-art commissioned and executed by Upper Palaeolithic communities is found scattered across Western Europe. While the Franco-Cantabrian regions of Western Europe and southern Italy boast some of prehistory's most vibrant artistic endeavours, beyond these areas rock art is usually replaced with portable art. However, rare examples of Upper Palaeolithic rock art can be found on schist rock outcropping through the deep V-shaped valleys of central and northern Portugal. Some of the most remarkable are found within the Côa Valley, a deep river gorge allocated for a large dam project.

A rocky start

During the early to mid 1990s, the Côa Valley in north-eastern Portugal became the focus of hot archaeological and political debate when plans were drawn up for the construction of an enormous dam. The energy company EDP, who proposed the dam project, commissioned an archaeological survey of the region ahead of building work, which led to the discovery of the open-air Upper Palaeolithic rock art. But when it appeared that the

company were trying to downplay the results, the archaeologists involved threatened to go to the press, so the significance of the ancient engravings was revealed to the public. The Côa Valley rock art is now considered to be unique, and it is the first large concentration of open-air engraved rock art to be found in Europe. Following frantic bargaining between the Portuguese Government and the power company, in the face of world opinion, it was finally decided that the dam project must be abandoned.

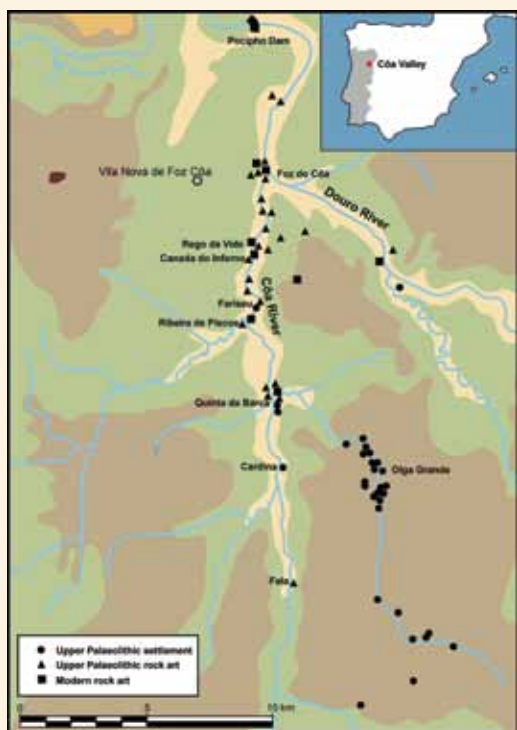
The assemblage, which numbers over 1,000 panels with more than 5,000 figures, is dotted over a 17km stretch of the Côa Valley Archaeological Park, between the site of Faia on the Côa and the confluence with the Douro River. Recent discoveries have also been made outside the Côa Valley Archaeological Park, along its various tributaries outside the protected area of the park. These new finds suggest that the rock-art tradition is geographically continuous, and probably once extended over most of northern and central Portugal.

Upper Palaeolithic rock art is found on both sides of the Côa River, along with engraved images that date between the Bronze Age and the present. In 1998, the upper reaches of the Côa Valley were designated a World Heritage Site, and placed on UNESCO's



ABOVE Detailed replica of Rock No. 11 of Canada do Inferno site, on display in the new museum.





LEFT Map showing the Côa Valley, with its river and tributaries.

BELOW Detail of a horse's head from the Canada do Inferno site.

BOTTOM Panoramic view of the Penascosa site, which stands just above the floodplain of the Côa.



TRAVEL

PORTUGAL

list – a designation that later also included the Siega Verde region of Spain, where a further 450 engravings of a similar style were identified. Sixteen years on, the Côa Valley – an area of around 20,000ha – is now a fully operational heritage area, offering visitors an opportunity not only to see some of Europe's most important early prehistoric engraved rock art, but also to enjoy the more recent history at Foz Côa, the principal town of the region.

The Côa River is one of a number of tributaries that flow into the mighty Douro, which, over millennia, cut its way through the landscape to create a series of steep-sided gorges. Where the river widens, rocky outcrops have been eroded to reveal smooth horizontal and vertical surfaces. Elsewhere, exposed laminated schist has been vertically shattered by wind and freeze-thaw processes; both types of surface present ideal canvases for Upper Palaeolithic artists.

From aurochs to aircraft

The Côa Valley's early prehistoric rock art dates between 23,000 and 10,000 BC, and comprises mainly animal scenes: horse and bovines dominate. Within this date range, archaeologists have identified a potential chronological sequence. The earliest, between 23,000 and

20,000 BC, shows a variety of megafauna that includes wild bulls, goat, and horses. The second era has been recognised as dating between 20,000 and 18,000 BC, with further animal depictions and examples of muzzled horses, which suggest possible direct interaction with Upper Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer communities.

Between 18,000 and 10,000 BC, during the Magdalenian period, the rock art arguably becomes more elaborate, and includes the detailed imagery typical of both anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, with depictions such as horses, aurochs, and red deer. The majority of Upper Palaeolithic engravings are found in the lower reaches of the valley, between the river and the steep slopes, usually on jagged rock-outcropping. So far, 23 rock-art areas have been identified, concentrated into three distinct areas: Faia, Quinta da Barca and Penascosa, and the area around the mouth of the Ribeira de Piscos river. Further engravings and paintings have been found that date from the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods to the Bronze Age, as well as many from the Iron Age. All this artwork is defined by specific characteristics that are recognised elsewhere in Western Europe. In addition to this large corpus of prehistoric rock art, Roman and post-Medieval engravings are also present, albeit ▶





limited to a few isolated sites, and engraved images of aircraft, boats, bridges, and trains complete the ensemble.

Generally, three types of engravings have been recognised: the most dominant is the filiform incision, created by a small lithic blade tool (probably flint or quartz) that enables very fine engravings of red deer and horses to be made. This technique, used during the Upper Palaeolithic and Iron Age, was applied to the rock surface in two ways: first to make an outline of the engraved image, then to fill it in. Sometimes, Upper Palaeolithic and Iron Age engravings using this technique are found on the same panel, as at Vermelhosa.

The second most-common technique is pecking, which allows the figure to be seen from a distance. It was produced either by direct or indirect percussion, using a hard hammer-stone. The third, and rarest, technique makes use of existing lines, arguably a technique that can be considered an enhancement of an existing engraving. All three methods would have created patination that produced vibrant images, perhaps enhanced by pigments, though we cannot know for sure. What is clear is that all three engraving techniques were occasionally used together, probably at different times, with the same panel periodically visited by different artists. Such visits would have allowed each figure to be refreshed and embellished.

Many engraved animals – bovines, horses, and red deer – were strategically superimposed over one another. The most elaborate phase of carvings appears to occur between 16,000 and 10,000 years ago, during the Magdalenian period, while later works, dating to between the Mesolithic and Iron Age, employ different styles and subject-matter from their Palaeolithic counterparts.

Museum of rock

When the Côa Valley and its rock art became a World Heritage Site in 1998, the economy of the valley changed from quarrying and wine to archaeology and wine – a perfect combination. At the same time, archaeologists began to thoroughly explore the valley, prospecting for more rock art. Excavation was undertaken at several sites, which revealed further rock art but, more importantly, archaeologists managed to produce a rough dating-sequence for the engravings, using chronometric techniques.

Since then, a number of important research projects have been implemented. One of the more bizarre ideas was to introduce, in 2003, the Przewalski's horse into the area: this particular species is believed to be a surviving relic from the Palaeolithic era, and a possible descendant of those depicted on the Côa Valley panels.

In 2004, the regional authorities decided to construct a purpose-built museum at Vila Nova de Foz Côa. The building's radical design was drawn up by Portuguese architects Pedro Tiago Pimentel and Camilo Rebelo, and its doors were finally opened during the summer of 2010. Today, it houses a unique collection of about 50 Upper Palaeolithic plaquettes along with a large assemblage of Upper Palaeolithic flint tools, all accessible to the public. The plaquettes, found at Quinta da Barca Sul





FAR LEFT Detail of the head and neck of a doe from the Vermelhosa site, created by a lithic blade and then infilled.

LEFT Rock engraved with animal figures at the Penascosa site.

ABOVE Detailed replica of the rock art found at the Fariseu site.

RIGHT An example of the rock art *in situ* at Ribeira de Piscos.



and Fariseu, display finely engraved animals, created using the filiform technique, while a number of amazingly authentic casts of the main rock-art panels along the Côa Valley are exhibited in the main hall of the museum.

For those feeling a little more adventurous, the Côa Museum authorities will arrange trips in 4WD vehicles to several of the more famous rock art sites that occupy the schist outcrops along the Côa, such as Penascosa – though please note, these tours must be booked in advance. The journey between the museum and the rock-art panels is along what can only be described as a dirt track that runs from the Côa Museum to the villages of Muxagata and Castelo Melhor. Our experience of the 30-minute drive was more like a safari than a tour, so be prepared for a bumpy ride! ▣

Dr George Nash, of SLR Consulting, UK, and Sara Garcês, are with the Centro de Geociências, Museu de Arte Pré-Histórica de Mação, Portugal.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The museum for the Côa Valley archaeological site is in the small historic town of Vila Nova de Foz Côa. The nearest train station is Pocinho, a short taxi-drive away. The Foz Côa Museum organises field-trips to several sites, including Penascosa, Ribeira de Piscos, and Canada do Inferno, where the best examples of the Côa Valley rock art can be seen. Guided tours last about two hours, and are worth every euro!

For more information, visit their website: www.arte-coa.pt

LEFT The radical architecture of the Foz Côa Museum.

BELOW Adventuring by 4WD to the Ribeira de Piscos rock-art site.

